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# GEOGRAPHIC INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

CIA/RR-GM-I  
13 November 1956

## *FRONTIERS IN SINAI*

DOCUMENT NO. 1  
NO CHANGE IN CLASS. ☐  
☒ DECLASSIFIED  
CLASS. CHANGED TO: TS S C  
NEXT REVIEW DATE: \_\_\_\_\_  
AUTH: MR 70-2  
DATE: 21/8/79 REVIEWER: 035377

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
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Israel's seizure of the Sinai Peninsula, in conjunction with British and French military action against Egypt, raises the question of new frontiers in Sinai. In the United Nations on 2 November 1956, the British referred to the Israel-Egypt Armistice Line as being inadequate, and it may be inferred that a new boundary line is perhaps under consideration.

Sinai is largely a barren, rocky wasteland. The rugged terrain of the south, with elevations over 8,000 feet, becomes lower towards the north, finally opening out into relatively flat sand-dune country of the Mediterranean coastal plain. Ground-water resources are poor throughout the peninsula. The northern two-thirds is nearly waterless, receiving about 3 inches of rainfall per year; in the south, outwash from the higher elevations produces only a few areas in which brackish water is available. Sinai is a harsh land, ideal as a buffer zone.

The indications are that Israel will bargain strongly for a boundary that runs on a line from Al'Arish on the Mediterranean southward to the tip of Sinai on the Red Sea, thus incorporating the eastern half of the peninsula within Israel. Israel would prefer to leave western Sinai not to Egypt but to the United Nations as a demilitarized neutral zone separating her from Egypt. Such an arrangement would satisfy two cardinal points of British foreign policy that reach far back in history:

1. To keep western Sinai as a wasteland buffer protecting the Suez Canal
2. To keep the Gulf of Aqaba from falling into unfriendly hands that might threaten the water route to India

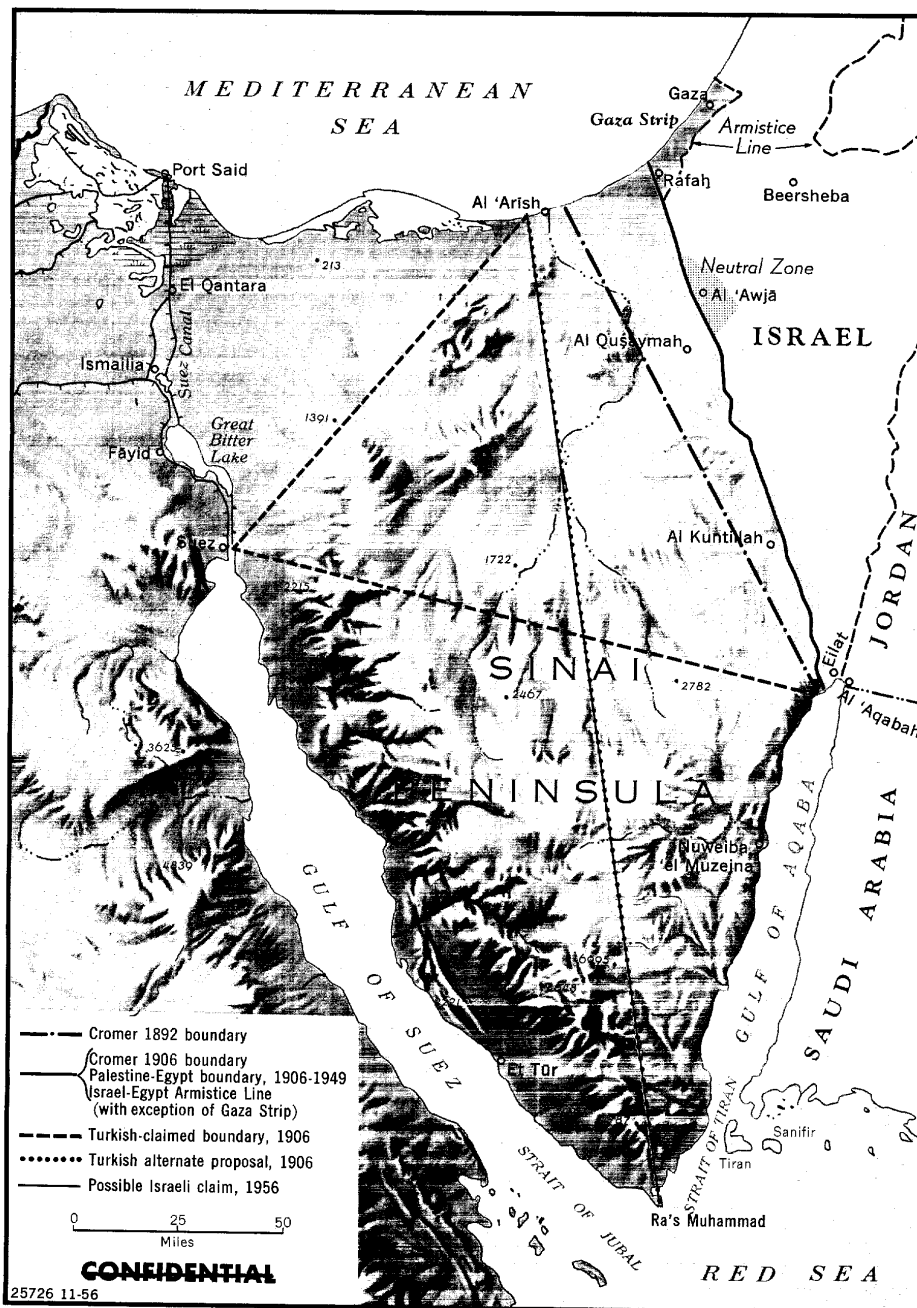
There have been many indications of Israel's desire to expand into Sinai. For instance, at the time of the Gaza incidents in early 1955, Ben Gurion taunted Nasr with the statement that Israel would populate land with people capable of cultivating wasteland, meaning Sinai. Both men knew that the Egyptian shuns the desert but that the Israeli does not. A less well known manifestation of the Israeli intention is contained in the juridical interpretation of the Armistice Agreements by Shabtai Rosenne who, in 1951, was the Legal Advisor to the Israeli Ministry for Foreign Affairs. On the basis of paragraph 2, Article V of the Israel-Egypt Armistice Agreement he concluded that:

1. Whereas all other armistice lines of Israel were the equivalent of international frontiers, that with Egypt was not.
2. Paragraph 2, Article V, having emphasized that the Israel-Egypt Armistice Line was not to be construed as a political boundary, would not prevent either party from "raising in the future any arguments it likes regarding the final delimitation of the frontier."

Shabtai Rosenne's views are important not because Israel has now chosen to revise her frontier in Sinai but rather because they singled out the Egyptian frontier on a legal basis as the place to strike.

The present situation in Sinai bears a close resemblance to certain historical events. Most maps printed before 1892 showed the frontier beginning at Al'Arish. In 1892, Britain's Lord Cromer modified Egypt's frontiers arbitrarily. He did not establish a formal boundary but instead confined himself to eliminating Turkish rule in Sinai. He published his interpretation of the boundary as being a line running just east of Al'Arish on the Mediterranean to the head of the Gulf of Aqaba. Turkey neither assented to nor rejected Lord Cromer's unilateral declaration.

# FRONTIERS IN SINAI



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In 1906, Turkey claimed that the boundary ran from Al'Arīsh to Suez to the Gulf of Aqaba. In passing, it should be noted how closely these lines enclose the area of recent Israeli military operation in Sinai. By 1906, even British cartographers showed the Al'Arīsh-Suez-Aqaba line as the boundary. Cromer, however, was obstinate, and the Turks proposed a compromise line running from Al'Arīsh to the southern tip of Sinai. Cromer, a practical historical geographer, realized that the Turkish solution would leave the Gulf of Aqaba as a closed Turkish Sea and as a standing menace to the trade route eastward. As if to echo his statement, the Egyptians did become a menace when the Israeli tried to use the Gulf of Aqaba outlet to the Red Sea.

Cromer's views prevailed and the northern end of the frontier was shifted eastward towards Rafah on the Mediterranean coast. The southern terminus was at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba. Cromer backed up his argument by rightly claiming that boundary pillars had been at Rafah for many years during the Middle Ages. The boundary between Egypt and Palestine, little changed in 1949, had as its basis this boundary which Lord Cromer imposed on the Turks in 1906.

The Zionists were and are keenly interested in Sinai. In 1902, Herzl, founder of the organization, approached Joseph Chamberlin, then British Colonial Secretary, and proposed to him that a charter be granted to the Zionist Organization to colonize Al'Arīsh territory, which was apparently defined as all of Sinai. Cromer ultimately rejected the Al'Arīsh scheme on the basis that Nile water could not be spared for irrigation, but a more cogent reason for the rejection was that Sinai as a barren desert would provide better protection for British-held Egypt than it would if its northern coastal plain were populated by farmers. Throughout its history Zionism has never forgotten Al'Arīsh.

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